

# Barriers to Disney Live-Action Movie *Mulan*: A Study Among Chinese Audience's Attitude Towards *Mulan* (2020)

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## ABSTRACT

This article puts *Mulan* (2020) as the starting point, analyzing the different thoughts of the movie from the west and the Chinese to show the different cultural cognition given by different nationalities and the Chinese' reaction on how Disney dealt the difference in the movie. Previous scholars mainly studied the difference between 'The Ballad of *Mulan*', the animated *Mulan* (1998) and the live-action *Mulan* (2020) from culture, theme, narration, film art, feminist theories and other aspects. The purpose of this paper is to research the differences reflected from different groups of audience. In this era of globalization, and in the face of different cultures, only by taking its essence and its cross will produce masterpieces that attract worldwide attention. After analyzing the receiving of *Mulan* (2020), this study can show some views on the cross-cultural movie-making which will bring help to the further creation movie on the Chinese traditional characters.

**Keywords:** *Mulan*, Disney, movie, audience

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Mulan* (2020) is a live-action drama film produced by Walt Disney Pictures. It was released in Mainland China on September 11, 2020 and is available for Disney + viewing in some countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The storyline is adapted from a famous Chinese tale, 'the Ballad of *Mulan*'. 'The Ballad of *Mulan*' is a well-known and traditional tale in Chinese history with the storyline that the heroine Hua *Mulan* disguised herself as a man in order to join the army in her old and weak father's place, protecting the family and the country. It is considered as a model of loyalty, justice, filial piety and bravery in Chinese culture.

Followed by the animated *Mulan* movie made by Disney as a character in the Disney Princess series in 1998, the live action movie *Mulan* has collected the typical Chinese faces including Liu Yifei and Gong Li to present a new Disney *Mulan* in 2020. The setting and plot of the latest version of *Mulan* are closer to the original cultural background according to Disney. However, after being screened in Chinese theaters, it was scored badly

and received negative comments from the audience. From the perspectives of the Chinese audience, this version of *Mulan* was been adapted with an American understanding and presented the whole story from an American's point of view. Not only the unsuitable makeups and the buildings different from the original tale, but also the spiritual core have all been considered weird and unreasonable by disappointed Chinese audience.

This paper set out to explore the barriers in Chinese audience understanding the *Mulan* (2020), to answer our research questions of:

What is the understanding gap between Chinese audience and western audience towards *Mulan*?

What attitude did Chinese audience hold towards *Mulan* (2020) and Why?

This paper first analyzed the different understanding between the Chinese audience and the western audience. The further research, based on the feedback from the audience we interviewed and sampled, showed the result

of how they feel the cultural identity in a Chinese-storied movie made in America.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

At present, in the literature searched by author, there are few studies on the culture identity of *Mulan* (2020). Most have discussed the cultural differences or analyzed from the cross-cultural perspectives and feminist perspectives. Good examples of Disney version princess and better version of *Mulan* do exist. Finding out what Chinese audience were not satisfied can not only get improvement in other traditional tales film producing but also disseminate our culture widely and vividly. It is instructive for us to tell Chinese stories in English, and we need to make the ancient tales' glow with new vitality and interpret the unique traditional culture to audience domestic and abroad. The traditional culture can be reborn in the adapted movies, meanwhile, the attractive and empathetic presentation to people of other cultural backgrounds is necessary.

In Lei Wang's article *Cultural Differences in Mulan between Chinese Version and Disney Version* [1], Disney localized its character and part of the plot on the premise of keeping its original plot, so that *Mulan* finally became a self-seeking Chinese girl who was also recognized by Western values. By comparing with "The Ballad of *Mulan*", its key details and the ending was adapted, which reflects the difference of Collectivism and Individualism, Concept of Hierarchy and Sense of Equality; Male Chauvinism and Feminist Consciousness and Traditional Inheritance System and Independent family member relationship. Similarly, the view from "Yellow Skin, White Masks": A Post-colonial Study of Disney Live-action Movie *Mulan* (Mengjie Chen, Yuan Tian 2021) [2], the Chinese elements in the movie were not presented with a profound understanding on them, failing in conveying the real Chinese cultural connotation. Additionally, the live action *Mulan* is now the American version of the Oriental story filled with western essence and western view. Over-emphasize of the women's right in the film is a typical example of the Western stereotype on feudalism and defending the country. They believed that the ancient oriental empire and the social role of oriental men and women in American imagination results in the inappropriate culture output in *Mulan* (2020). Followed by their research "A Feminist Analysis of the Live-action Disney Film *Mulan*" [3], it can be learnt that the reason why the female character *Mulan* became a loyal, brave and true warrior is the social background and what she suffered, but not the feminism with the Western definition.

Our research is going to figure out how Chinese audience thinks about the differences in *Mulan* (2020) and what judgement they give towards. The paper will try to find out Chinese audience's attitude and their culture identity with *Mulan* (2020), analyzing their

reasons to see which *Mulan* the Chinese accept as the original one.

## 3. METHOD

We plan to compare the difference in the reviews that Chinese audience and Western audience made for *Mulan* (2020). Compare the attitudes of two part of audience what element in the film made them think so. We get this through interviews and databases on social media platforms. We've learned that the majority of Chinese audience's attitude toward the live-action *Mulan* film is far from that of the previous remakes. The social media platform we use is Douban Rating and IMDb. Douban Rating is the most professional platform in China to show audience's comments on films and can be used as a standard for a movie or TV series. Different people have different viewing angles and interpretation angles of a movie. Douban has no authority to modify the rating. Douban rating is the reflection of every netizen who scores on Douban, which can be used as a reference for choosing movies or TV programs. IMDb is an online database of movie actors, movies, TV shows, TV stars and movie productions, including numerous information about movies, actors, running times, content introductions, ratings, reviews and more. IMDb ratings are the most used for movie ratings. We cited some of the charts and posts of data analysis to compare each film. We went deeper into individual to know more about how Chinese audience think of this film. We interviewed several young Chinese audiences to analyze their thoughts and the culture flaw in the film. To get the further information of the thoughts and reviews of the western audience on *Mulan* (2020), we also collected some comments from twitter.

## 4. UNDERSTANDING GAP BETWEEN THE CHINESE AND THE WES

### 4.1. Different concerns

Most western audience felt disappointed on the lack of the plot in the animated version. For example, the cut of the Mushu Dragon is what they are not satisfied.

"So how can the new *Mulan* have powers, witches, and a phoenix but no Mushu or Shang (twitter user, 2020/9/6).

The western compared the *Mulan* (2020) with the animated version of *Mulan* in 1998 and they had already set their expectation at the standard of *Mulan* (1998). And the result is that many audiences in the west thought the *Mulan* (2020) didn't reach the *Mulan* (1998) and disappointedly found many classical moments in 1998 didn't appear after 22 years.

"While the disappointment that is expressed is understandable, as there are big flaws to be found and it

definitely does not have the same amount of charm, heart and thrills as the 1998 film.” (IMDb user, 2021/1/27)

“My review of *Mulan 2020*: You should just watch *Mulan 1998*” (twitter user, 2020/9/12)

“But the movie fails to be a remake of the animated movie.” (twitter user, 2021/4/24) The west first learned *Mulan* from its animated version so they have already taken the animated *Mulan* as an original one but the live action *Mulan* failed to re-appear the characteristic details in *Mulan* (1998), which made western audience felt unfamiliar with the changed *Mulan*.

While in China, what most audience care about is how the Chinese culture is used in the movie. And the Chinese audience paid attention to check and were disappointed and unsatisfied to see the mistaken Chinese traditional elements. Most reviews started with the criticism of the wrong cultural adaptation.

“The wrong interpretation of Chinese classic characters; Misreading and even spoiling Chinese history. This is not the *Mulan* we wanted to see.” (Douban user, 2020/9/8)

“The location of *Mulan*'s hometown and the situation of the war are not historical. The costume and the make-up of the characters are perfunctory.” (Douban user, 2020/9/16)

The Chinese was taught the ancient tale ‘The Ballad of *Mulan*’ when they were little and they value the history behind *Mulan*. As the live-action *Mulan* was acted by a famous actress with wide-recognized face in China, many Chinese expected to see an original *Mulan* from the traditional tale with many accurate details to show its authenticity.

#### ***4.2. Different understanding on the plot***

The western audience considered *Mulan* as a common but boring film telling a traditional Chinese cultural story and the Kungfu part wasn’t as the level as it used to be.

“*Mulan* is a dull thud of a live action remake that strips away a lot of subtext that the animated version had. It looked like I was watching *Kung Fu Panda* without the fun.” (IMDb user, 2020/9/8) Compared with the previous Hollywood blockbusters with Chinese themes, it failed to provide the aesthetics of ancient Chinese action. The action scenes are too chaotic and the battlefield background doesn’t bring a sense of real history.

“Time and time again, the action scenes feel wrongly constructed like having too many cooks in the kitchen.” (IMDb user, 2020/9/11)

Additionally, the classical part in this familiar story was replaced by some stilted plots and characters. For example, *Xianniang* and *Bori Khan* felt like unrelated

characters without showing the Chinese elements but only arouse the westerners’ confusion.

“Both *Xianniang* and *Bori Khan* felt like underdeveloped characters.” (IMDb user, 2021/1/27) Many original characters in the Chinese tales were adapted into the storyline but their meaning in the storytelling was not expressed. They didn’t understand the meanings of the main characters except *Mulan*, meanwhile, the importance of these characters to *Mulan* wasn’t expressed through the *Mulan* (2020).

“*Gong Li*’s *Xianniang* was the most interesting and has an ending that feels abrupt & unworthy of her.” (twitter user, 2021/6/12)

*Xianniang*, the villain, is pretty much a come and go plot device and her final scene is very rushed that she was suddenly moved by *Mulan* and died when saving her. To some extent, the *Mulan* they watched is not integrated without the key roles’ help.

In Chinese audience’s opinion, the film is commented as ridiculous.

“The plot is without rhythm or reason and the setting is ridiculous and funny.” (Douban user, 2021/2/17)

“*Mulan*: A Ridiculous Chinese version of *Frozen*” (Douban user, 2020/9/5)

And what made them feel inexplicable is the background of *Mulan*, especially the *Chi*. The *Chi* is unreasonable and strange to most Chinese audience.

“It has been emphasizing the *Chi*, saying that women can not let people know that they have the *Chi*. The film seems not to give the *Chi* a reasonable definition, I was like a question mark when watching.” (Douban user, 2020/9/5)

In most Chinese people’s mind, *Mulan* is not that strong in the beginning and was presented with a period of continuous training to become a warrior. That period could help evoke the audience's empathy. But in the live action movie, *Mulan* is born with great talented *Chi*.

“*Mulan* was originally a weak woman with lovely personality. After joining the army, she gradually became strong through strict training, which constituted the arc of the character's growth. In the live-action version, she was a different woman who had been gifted with the *Chi* since childhood, just like *Skywalker* who contains the Force.” (Douban user, 2020/9/16)

These all resulted in the consequence that *Mulan* is more like a Disney Hero but not an ambitious Chinese girl in the ‘The Ballad of *Mulan*’.

“The first line of the script is a fatal point of no return, treating the *Chi* as a substitute for the Force. That is to say, *Mulan* changes from a girl disciplined by male authority to a superwoman.” (Douban user, 2020/9/6)

### **4.3. Different understanding on the values/aesthetic**

Most western audience approved the values Loyalty, Bravery and Authenticity and admired the beautifully choreographed and dynamically photographed action. But one thing they were displeased is the language.

"I'm 100% sure the directors made the cast do an "ethnic accent" to make the film seem more "authentic". Made the dialogue bland. Feels like you're listening to classmates do popcorn reading in English class." (twitter user, 2020/9/6)

"Something that I had problems coping with in the 2020 version of *Mulan* was the fact that everyone spoke English. It just took away so much authenticity from the movie. If they had spoken Mandarin, as they were supposed to, the movie would have been all the more enjoyable." (IMDb user, 2020/9/13)

Even the western audience who don't speak mandarin thought that the Chinese *Mulan* speak the language that fit the story would be better. Language has been a problem for them to get involved this Chinese tale. Besides, as a Disney film, the movie needs comedy but Disney just goes too heavy on emphasizing the characters' values.

"Loyal, brave and true agreed did not need to be emphasised so much, the point was made quite quickly. There are things in the plot that sounded oddly intriguing on paper, but done too little with." (IMDb user, 2021/1/27)

How the values are delivered in the movie was a barrier for the westerners to enjoy the essence of *Mulan* (2020).

In China, what most audience cares about is how the Chinese elements were used in the movie. But the movie came out with some obvious cultural mistakes, like improper makeups and clothes; the place where the story happened being mistaken to be the mud buildings in Fujian province. "Mistakes in character modeling, costume design, and set design are too hard to accept. Neither fish nor fowl. It's too embarrassing." (Douban user, 2020/9/8)

The mistakes and wrong cultural details are the barriers for Chinese audience to get involved in the Disney *Mulan*. They are not used to the cultural environment adapted by the westerners and found it difficult to be immersed in the movie. Besides these western-adapted parts, what the Chinese audience can't accept is the theme ideas and the values that were expressed in the film.

"The values of the film are still full of western prejudice against the East brought by scriptwriting and directing, so as to demonize the tradition." (Douban user, 2020/9/8)

The values were firmly restructured by western stereotype on Chinese culture and history. However, those who with a bias towards traditional values was unsatisfied with its nondescript mixing. "The most prominent theme of *Mulan* 2020 is filial piety, which seems have become "politically correct" about the depicted Oriental culture, while ignoring the problems and contradictions of the concept of filial piety itself." (Douban user, 2020/9/21)

Others with a bias towards modern values came to be unsatisfied with its promoting 'obedient' to the man and the emperor.

"I particularly dislike obedient. The lines mentioned "devotion to family" many times throughout the whole process. From the beginning of the story of the father's jade engraved "filial piety" to the end of the story of the emperor's sword engraved "filial piety" was to indoctrination obedient. From the point of view of modern Chinese, this is a metaphor of two loyal filial piety mountain the father and the imperial power pressing *Mulan* from standing!" (Douban user, 2020/9/16)

The stereotype from the west wasn't shown in the casting but appeared everywhere in the movie. Some audience think that it is nearly a cultural appropriation for such western perspective on expressing Chinese *Mulan*.

## **5. CHINESE AUDIENCE'S ATTITUDE**

### **5.1. Negative attitude towards *Mulan* (2020)**

Analyzing from Douban rating, Chinese audience gave a average 4.9 of ten, which shows their disappointment and unsatisfactory; 18.2% of them gave only one star for this film. And in Weibo, the biggest social media in China, *Mulan*(2020) only gets 50% of the BigV recommendation. The total box office in China is 278 million yuan. These all illustrate that *Mulan* (2020) is not very popular and Chinese audience didn't like this movie much. Their attitude on this movie is negative.

### **5.2. Sense of not being valued**

The most mood the Chinese audience shared in their reviews is that they feel not be valued and they don't think the film crew respect the *Mulan* and the consumer groups in China. From the short comments in Douban we sampled, nearly 70% comments have mentioned the words like arrogance, stereotype, non-respect to express their feeling, such as "Full of western stereotypes of China, standing on a pedestal and knowing nothing about it..." (Douban user, 2020/12/8) "Please take a look at Chinese culture before you remake a Chinese story. There's a sense of arrogance that's starting to spill over the screen." (Douban user, 2020/10/8)

The Mulan that Chinese audience watched is not the one in the ‘The Ballad of Mulan’ or the animated Mulan, but the Mulan that the west think is the original from the ancient. From the Chinese’s perspectives, the west seems to pay effort in using a lot of Chinese traditional culture elements to attract audience but the effect in showing the Chinese Mulan is poor. The creation team makes great effort in gathering and presenting a diversity of Chinese elements but lack a profound understanding of them. Such an adaptation failed to convey the real Chinese cultural connotation. The west made a patchwork of Chinese elements they had acknowledged instead of researching deeply in the ancient tale. Chinese audience felt the Chinese were not valued by Disney for only providing such simple and crude Mulan. Additionally, when judged from the special posters for different countries, the creative team did not study China at all for the aesthetic of the poster for China is muddled, which gives people the impression that they are businessmen who just want to make money here. These are not a reinvention of Chinese culture. Mulan is used to express the routine of Disney princess movies: feminism and heroism. Mulan is now made into a westerner with yellow outside and white inside and Chinese audience considered it as an insult to Chinese history and felt offended. It is full of the sense of superiority to their own culture and values from the west and full of prejudice against Chinese culture and history.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The entire Walt Disney Company was built on that part of the Disney Pictures Entertainment.

The core of this part of the business is the world famous animated feature film and live action film business. The Walt Disney Company announced plans for Hong Kong Disneyland in 1999, tilting the entire Asia-Pacific strategy toward Hong Kong. In 2020, Disney adopted a three-pronged strategy that consisted of theatrical releases direct to Disney+, and a hybrid of theatrical and Premier Access premium VOD like how Cruella, Jungle Cruise and Black Widow was done. Disney unveiled the transactional “Premier Access” tier on Disney+ with Mulan in September 2020. With the development of globalization and the deepening of China's Economic Reform and opening up, China's economy and people's consciousness is growing prosperity. With its consumption capacity and consumption potential hugely increased, China's attitude towards the world is more inclusive but also more aware of its own value and the respect they were given.

Disney's adaptation and integration of Chinese culture and spirit was not very successful this time. As a work of cross-cultural communication, it can be said that there are many loopholes.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Through the comparison of the audience in Chinese and the west and the analysis of the Chinese audience's attitude, we can draw the conclusion that the westerners and the Chinese hold different understanding towards Mulan (2020), mainly in their expectations, characters learning and the aesthetic with its values. What's more, the Chinese were unsatisfied on the effort in Mulan (2020), which brings them the sense of disrespect. There is a limitation of data collection for researchers to collect all audience's review on Mulan so researchers decided to collect 300 short comments in Douban as the sample population. Another limitation for this study is researchers cannot research the whole west group, only picking the reviews on IMDb and twitter. Therefore, the movie industry may not be representing by this research. The research is for the movie production to know what audience really want through a remake of the traditional and classical character and what they have to pay attention to is the audience's feeling through the work they presented, not only the movie itself.

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